Nimi, Janaka and Seerahdwaja

The illustrious king Ikshvaku has a son called Nimi. After Nimi becomes the king, he once decides to perform a yagna in his kingdom. So he requests his guru, Vashishta to perform the yagna. But Vashishta says, “I’m afraid I will have to decline your request for now. Indra has already asked me to perform a yagna for him in Swarga during the same time. Allow me to complete that sacrifice first. I shall then perform the yagna that you have in mind in your kingdom.”

On hearing Vashistha’s words, Nimi just keeps quiet. So Vashishta assumes Nimi will wait for his return. He sits on his vimana and ascends to Swarga to perform Indra’s yagna. Nimi wonders if he can really wait for Vashishta to return. He knows yagnas involved long drawn rituals and were quite time consuming. He wonders if he will live long enough to complete the yagna that he has in mind if he decides to wait for Vashishta. He realizes he may not. So he initiates the yagna that he has in mind with the help of other Brahmanas.

After a while, Vashishta returns to earth only to learn that Nimi has already started his yagna without waiting for him. Vashishta is furious with Nimi. He was the guru of Nimi’s kingdom. Yet Nimi had started the yagna without waiting for him. So he curses his sishya and says, “You Nimi, a mere Kshatriya have the gumption to disobey your guru. You deserve to die this very instant.”

Nimi, a scholar himself, believes that Vashishta is not following the path of Dharma by cursing him. He has gained considerable powers by now. So Nimi too curses Vashishta and says, “O guru Vashishta, you were greedy and wanted Indra’s wealth. So you ignored your dharma. You are the guru of our kingdom. Yet instead of doing your duty for us you chose to please Indra. So I curse you too. For you too deserve nothing less than death.”

After cursing his guru Vashishta, Nimi sheds his body willingly because he has Atmagyan. Vashishta too leaves his body and is reborn as the son of Mitra Deva and Urvashi.

Now the Brahmanas who are performing the yagna are in a quandary. They wonder how they can complete the yagna without King Nimi. But they cannot stop the yagna midway either. So they decide to embalm Nimi's body in medicated oils and complete the yagna with the corpse of Nimi as the witness. When the yagna is complete, the Brahmanas invoke the devas. They ask the devas to collect the havis on behalf of Nimi. And request the devas to breathe life into the corpse of Nimi.

But they are surprised when they hear Nimi's voice speaking to them from space. King Nimi says, "Wise people yearn for the lotus feet of Lord Vishnu and seek moksha – liberation from the cycle of birth and death. I no longer wish to be imprisoned within my body. I have to leave it someday or the other. And now seems to be a good enough time for me."

The Devas have assembled at the yagna shala by now. Before Nimi could even think again about his decision they say, "Very well then Nimi. You will still have to live through your life on earth - for you had to cast aside your body before your time on earth was up. But we will respect your wishes too. You shall no longer be confined by your mortal body. But since you have to live through your life on earth you shall dwell in the eyelids of every living being."

And that is how king Nimi's strange wish was fulfilled. It is believed that king Nimi dwells in our eyelids and that is why we blink.

Well, now the rishis are confronted with a new problem. They had assumed that the devas would breathe life into their king's dead body and life would continue as usual in their kingdom. But now they are left with no king to rule over them. So they do whatever they can with what they have in hand.

They rub and churn Nimi's dead body and chant mantras while doing so. The potent heat of the mantras makes the dead body hot. And after a while a child springs to life out of it. The rishis give this child three names. The first name is "Janaka" which means a child who is his own father. Nimi and his son Janaka share the same physical body. So the child Janaka

represents his father Nimi too. The second name is “Vaideha” for the child’s father had left his body (Deha) and the third name is “Mithila” because he is born from the manthan of a corpse.

From then on Nimi’s kingdom had a city called Mithila. And all the kings who ruled Nimi’s kingdom after that were called “Janakas.” Several generations down the line a Janaka king called Seerahdwaja decides to conduct a yagna in the near future. So he starts ploughing some land outside Mithila to plant crops that he can use for the yagna. While ploughing the land, he finds a dazzling girl child and names her Sita. This girl Sita grows up and marries Rama of Ayodhya.

*The oldest and smallest unit of time in India is a Nimisha. It represents time that is as quick and fleeting as the blink of an eye. Nimi’s sons, the Janakas are scholars who create the Upanishads – which are basically dialogues of wise men that speak of the jiva and the atma in great detail. Mithila’s literature is popular in the Indo-Nepal border.

* Naimish-Aranya, the forest where the stories of the eighteen Mahapuranas and the epics the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were narrated by the storytellers to the sages, is the forest of king Nimi. This Namisharanya stands on the banks of the river Gomti, in Lucknow.

The nuances are subtle but clear too. We may have all the AtmaGyan in the world. AtmaGyan may help us cope with our karma and understand things which are beyond our imagination and control. AtmaGyan may help us reduce our karmic baggage in this life. But we cannot, repeat – cannot, just shed our body and opt out of our karma. We have to live through it. Have to. Hmmm. Yes, such stories do sober us up to the realities of life….